

Curb Enthusiasm Episode 14 Transcript

00;00;01;18 - 00;00;04;14

Emily Weidenhof

Welcome to Curb Enthusiasm. I'm Emily Weidenhof

00;00;04;20 - 00;00;06;05

Burkina Morgan

And I'm Burkina Morgan.

00;00;06;07 - 00;00;14;25

Emily Weidenhof

Our guest today is an author as well as a sociology professor and director of the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University.

00;00;14;27 - 00;00;25;02

Burkina Morgan

His research focuses on social infrastructure and how we can use public spaces to build stronger communities. It's our pleasure to welcome Eric Klinenberg to the show.

00;00;25;05 - 00;00;30;26

Emily Weidenhof

All right! Welcome Eric Klinenberg. We are so excited to speak with you today.

00;00;30;28 - 00;00;32;07

Eric Klinenberg

Thank you. It's great to be here.

00;00;32;10 - 00;00;45;12

Emily Weidenhof

We are great appreciators of your work and research, particularly in and about social infrastructure. Could you start off by telling us what is social infrastructure?

00;00;45;12 - 00;00;51;11

Eric Klinenberg

I figured we were not here at the Dot podcast to talk about, *Modern Romance* or *Heat Wave*, so that's good.

00;00;51;11 - 00;00;52;07

Emily Weidenhof

Maybe *Heat Wave*.

00;00;52;11 - 00;00;55;07

Eric Klinenberg

We can go. Okay. We can go there later. We'll find out.

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00;00;55;07 - 00;00;55;19

Emily Weidenhof

Yes.

00;00;55;19 - 00;01;11;20

Eric Klinenberg

So, it's good to be here. I'm happy to completely geek out over the next hour or a half hour or whatever. We have to talk about social infrastructure. What I mean by it is the physical places that shape our capacity to interact.

00;01;11;22 - 00;01;37;11

Eric Klinenberg

And so the in the way that I define this idea, if you invest in social infrastructure, if you design it well, if you build it well, if you maintain it well, if you program it well, you get all kinds of returns to your collective life. But if you neglect the social infrastructure, people tend to retreat to their screens, to the private spaces.

00;01;37;14 - 00;02;04;23

Eric Klinenberg

It's actually an idea that came to me when I was working on my first big sociology research project, a book about a heat wave in Chicago, which is my native city. I've been in New York for 20 some years now, but I grew up in Chicago, and it's kind of in my bones. And I came up with this concept when I was trying to understand why there were really different patterns of mortality during a catastrophic heat wave.

00;02;04;26 - 00;02;35;01

Eric Klinenberg

What I noticed, you know, to be brief about it, is that the neighborhoods that did poorly, they felt kind of depleted and abandoned. They had a lot of empty lots. They had a lot of shuttered-down buildings, not a lot of great public spaces for people to play. You know, fairly weak community, organizational structure, broken sidewalks, kind of conditions that make you want to hunker down at home, which is what older people, especially, did.

00;02;35;04 - 00;03;02;04

Eric Klinenberg

And the neighborhoods that had really low mortality rates, actually even lower mortality rates than some of the wealthiest neighborhoods on the north side of Chicago. Those were neighborhoods that had pretty strong neighborhood infrastructure. They had little pocket parks. They had playgrounds. They had very stable population levels. And so the apartments were intact. The sidewalks are intact.

00;03;02;07 - 00;03;23;05

Eric Klinenberg

There was a commercial artery that was very busy. And everyday life in those neighborhoods was full of people, which meant that, you know, if it got really hot and

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dangerous outside and people were used to seeing each other in public, if if an older person wasn't out, you just knocked on their door and it turned out that that knock on the door made the difference between life and death.

00;03;23;05 - 00;03;40;11

Eric Klinenberg

And so the thesis of a lot of my work that we've kind of collectively failed to notice how important the social infrastructure is and that we have, significant set of improvements. We could make if we just paid attention. Give it some resources.

00;03;40;14 - 00;03;50;06

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah. And I think you're shining a light on that. And amplifying the value is something that's so meaningful and exciting to us on the public realm team.

00;03;50;09 - 00;04;02;14

Emily Weidenhof

And, you know, at D.O.T., we were thinking about the streets, but there are other kind of critical public, social infrastructure that you talk a lot about libraries, schools.

00;04;02;14 – 00;04;08;00

Emily Weidenhof

Could you share, you know, examples of powerful social infrastructure in those places?

00;04;08 - 00;04;17;13

Eric Klinenberg

I mean, we can definitely talk about sidewalks and streets, you know, just up the alley of the dot, because they are really a crucial part of the social infrastructure.

00;04;17;13 - 00;04;38;11

Eric Klinenberg

And I even think that, public transit plays an incredibly important role in shaping us as citizens, you know, like to be a New Yorker and to learn how to use the subway is a real life lesson and civics lesson because, you know, one thing you learn is that, first of all, you don't have to be friends with everybody.

00;04;38;13 - 00;04;59;11

Eric Klinenberg

You don't have to be in a community with everybody. And there's this kind of like soft, fuzzy, nostalgic language about community building that comes into these conversations sometimes where, like, we're imagining some fantasy Mayberry world, you know, that that never really existed. And the notion is like, we all need to wake up in the morning and think about how to build community.

00;04;59;19 - 00;05;21;09

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Eric Klinenberg

But that I don't think that's really how the world works. And I think a great lesson in how to be a citizen and how to be a citizen or just a person. And New York City, is you go into the subway or you go on a bus and you have to first recognize that there's a lot of other people like you.

00;05;21;15 - 00;05;41;21

Eric Klinenberg

Second, you have to recognize that they have legitimate needs and interests and preferences. They might be different than yours. Three, that they might be different in other ways as well. Linguistically, culturally, physically, ideologically. Who knows what kinds of differences are going to come out. And then fourth most important, you all have to get along on the bus ride or the subway ride.

00;05;41;21 - 00;06;13;15

Eric Klinenberg

You have to feel you have to find a way to coexist in the time that you have together in a in a pretty peaceful way. And it turns out that that's not an easy thing to do, in a place that's really packed and busy. But we've developed we developed this muscle, the skill for managing it. And I actually think that people who don't know New York are often surprised at how civil it is, how, you know, how we manage to get along and get through these kind of uncomfortable situations.

00;06;13;17 - 00;06;24;02

Eric Klinenberg

And so that's a funny way in which I think that just the transit infrastructure shapes us. But I wasn't going to go. I could also talk about things like playgrounds and parks, but let's see what else is on your mind.

00;06;24;07 - 00;06;35;10

Burkina Morgan

Yeah, I think that's a great place and a good direction to go. And you talk about transportation systems and public transportation as a form, social infrastructure.

00;06;35;15 - 00;06;49;15

Burkina Morgan

And I'm interested in hearing about how you measure in terms of difference in value, difference in outcome between transient social infrastructure and static social infrastructure like plazas or open streets.

00;06;49;17 - 00;07;01;19

Eric Klinenberg

Let's just say that there are different kinds of social infrastructure that do different things for us. You're fairly unlikely to develop close friends on your subway ride in the morning on a commute.

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00;07;01;19 - 00;07;29;18

Eric Klinenberg

I mean, it's possible that, you know, you go to work at the same time or go to school the same time every day, and there's somebody else who's always on the car with you, and at some point you hit up a conversation. But I think these kinds of transient social infrastructure, places that we move through quickly. They help us to develop a sense of what it means to share space, to be part of a city, to be tolerant and understanding, to recognize each other's humanity.

00;07;29;20 - 00;07;53;03

Eric Klinenberg

Maybe they help us learn to be decent. Those are really good skills to have. It's hard to have a good city without those things. More static social infrastructure. Let's take a playground. You know, that operates really differently because, you know, I raised my kids in New York. They're now teenagers. But when they're very young, you know, like most New Yorkers, I live in a pretty small apartment, and my kids had a lot of energy.

00;07;53;05 - 00;08;21;01

Eric Klinenberg

And my wife and I felt often like we needed to find some release. And what a godsend it is to live near a nice, shaded, you know, well-equipped, well-maintained playgrounds because there's a physical space for your kid to run around and for you to decompress a little bit. But more crucially, at the playground, you know, you find other people who are in the same situation.

00;08;21;03 - 00;08;45;28

Eric Klinenberg

And if you go to a playground every day after school, it doesn't take long for you to start to recognize the other faces. And if you live in a place that doesn't have good access to playground, you're really screwed by comparative purposes. And also, like these playgrounds are not God given. They're a kind of social infrastructure. And some cities, some states and some governments invest in them and others don't.

00;08;46;00 - 00;09;03;01

Eric Klinenberg

It makes a massive difference to your quality of life, and it makes a massive difference to your chances of feeling like you're part of something bigger, maybe even believing in the government or the society that you're in if you do it well.

00;09;03;03 - 00;09;36;00

Burkina Morgan

Piggy backing off what you just said. When it comes to communities that are built off of interaction that happens within social infrastructure, do you think that when cities and planners are thinking about how to implement and build social infrastructure, that they should go where they see communities that are being formed or have already formed, or

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should they be thinking about areas that we see less indicators of community areas that we potentially see

00;09;36;04 - 00;09;46;06

Burkina Morgan

or have shown less resilience over time, and plan to then implement social infrastructure in those areas? Like what directionality do you think there should be between the two?

00;09;46;09 - 00;09;58;02

Eric Klinenberg

Well, those are those are political decisions based on your priorities. And, you know, I don't think that there is a formula for how you make decisions about allocating resources or focusing your energy.

00;09;58;05 - 00;10;17;18

Eric Klinenberg

But I think in every city or community, you try to figure out, you know, where you're going to get the most impact, and you should definitely make sure that every community has at least a baseline set of public goods that are available to them. And in my work, I kind of draw from Robert Putnam a little bit to to distinguish between places that are really good for bonding.

00;10;17;20 - 00;10;35;22

Eric Klinenberg

Like they help people in a group form bonds with other people who are, you know, roughly speaking, in their groups of, say, kids from the same socioeconomic background, same racial group. And then there's other spaces that are good for what he calls bridging, like moving across some of our differences. And for sure, we need both of those things.

00;10;35;22 - 00;11;02;07

Eric Klinenberg

And a lot of Americans are concerned about this crisis of connection, and there's a lot of anxiety about loneliness and social isolation in the air these days. But the bridging thing is also pretty important, and I think we have a lot more work to do to figure out how to create a connective tissue that allows people from different neighborhoods, different class backgrounds, different ethnic backgrounds, and people with different political preferences.

00;11;02;10 - 00;11;25;23

Eric Klinenberg

How do we start to generate more contact and social integration? And that kind of work at the level of planning requires really careful attention to the edge spaces where you can see, you know, different groups coming together. So where where could you build a park or a playground or a soccer field so that we're luring people from different parts of the city?

00;11;25;26 - 00;11;52;20

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Eric Klinenberg

Or can you think about how transit plays a role in that? On our visit, I did, after palaces for the people came out. I went to Atlanta and was shown around this amazing program they have there where they're building these small soccer fields. Right under the train system, like under under the train stops. And they set it up so that people from different neighborhoods in Atlanta could very easily train from soccer match to soccer match.

00;11;52;20 - 00;12;10;06

Eric Klinenberg

And they could the kids could play in different areas. And it was it was explicitly designed to be an accessible network of soccer fields. And kids got to know their city and got to know other kids in the area through that. And New York City is a different kind of place. But what a cool idea it is to to do that.

00;12;10;06 - 00;12;19;02

Eric Klinenberg

And I'd like to see us pay more attention to how the social infrastructure we develop could bridge our kind of segregated communities here.

00;12;19;08 - 00;12;34;11

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah. And I think a lot of what we think about in terms of public spaces, community, from from a transportation perspective is it's not just about having a great park, but it's how you get there, right?

00;12;34;11 - 00;12;56;27

Emily Weidenhof

If there's a great park, a great playground, a great plaza, but it is across a street that's very wide and challenging to cross, that, you know, maybe parents don't want to let their kids cross at a certain age. Right? That is a huge part of of access to our public spaces and, and social infrastructure as well.

00;12;56;27 - 00;13;13;28

Emily Weidenhof

And for us, the open street program has been an amazing way to have a conversation with communities, have communities tell us where they want these public spaces to be, and also where their public spaces and where their neighborhoods need to be better connected.

00;13;14;00 - 00;13;35;13

Burkina Morgan

And I think even it reinforces and creates a physical venue for some of the communities that are formed in those areas and gives an additional tool to some of the main stakeholders that are connected to whether it's school, communities and the elderly, and allow across almost between the static and the transient.

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00;13;35;13 - 00;13;40;00

Burkina Morgan

social infrastructure and it's created a lot of opportunity throughout the city.

00;13;40;00 - 00;13;59;00

Emily Weidenhof

And we've seen over time that creating space with communities keeps the spaces relevant and keeps communities active. And I'm wondering if you could talk about the role of public space and social infrastructure in the larger resilience context?

00;13;59;00 - 00;14;03;13

Eric Klinenberg

Just in terms of public space, I mean, think about the Covid pandemic.

00;14;03;16 - 00;14;29;00

Eric Klinenberg

I know it's a great topic we all love to think about, but actually, you know, I wrote a book about what happened in New York during 2020. It's called *2020*. And one of the chapters is really about Jackson Heights. And a big part of that chapter is what happened on 34th Avenue, Open Street and how the community banded together to, to create a kind of equivalent to a park, a play space, a recreation space, a social space.

00;14;29;02 - 00;14;57;20

Eric Klinenberg

Because if you live in Jackson Heights, you know you're living in one of the densest parts of the city, if not the country. And it's in addition to density. There's a lot of crowding at the apartment lot with a lot of people, you know, per unit in Jackson Heights. And, you know, you have some big parks not too far away, but if you walk the streets of Jackson Heights, you're hard pressed to find a lot of green space where you can just kind of hang out and get shade and play and relax.

00;14;57;20 - 00;15;23;04

Eric Klinenberg

And so when the residents banded together to create an open street on this, you know, terrific avenue, they really transformed the neighborhood and I think bolster their resilience because they gave themselves a way to live significantly better during a time that was very, very challenging. And so there's amazing ingenuity in our New York City communities. I think there's a real appetite for more public spaces.

00;15;23;06 - 00;16;01;08

Eric Klinenberg

And, you know, I think the struggle that communities have is that in our system now just it does take a lot of work at the community level to advocate for yourself, you know, to be heard and to compete in the city full of very powerful people. And and so I think a question on the policymaking side is, you know, how do we make sure that those communities are,

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you know, really feel like they're enfranchised and capable of advocating for themselves in a in a context where they might be competing for attention with some of the wealthiest, you know, neighborhoods on Earth.

00;16;01;10 - 00;16;23;15

Emily Weidenhof

Hey, listeners, we hope you're enjoying this episode of our podcast. For those of you who are as enthusiastic about transportation and planning as we are, we'd like to hear from you. You can submit topics and questions that you'd like us to cover at nyc.gov/curb-enthusiasm and now back to our conversation.

00;16;23;17 - 00;16;38;17

Burkina Morgan

What are some ways and things that we can look at that are indicators ahead of, let's say a crisis or a natural disaster that are indicators of whether it's strong resilience or weak resilience in the realm of social infrastructure?

00;16;38;23 - 00;16;58;21

Eric Klinenberg

It's typically the case when there's like a big heat wave or a hurricane coming that you can predict in advance which people and places are going to be affected most. And sometimes it's, you know, about the topography, like if you're in a low lying area, you're more likely to be hit by a big storm surge.

00;16;58;23 - 00;17;16;24

Eric Klinenberg

If you're in an area that you know is prone to inundation from cloudburst, you're going to get flooding more, if you don't have a lot of shade and you've got a lot of brick buildings, you're going to get heated more. But what you're saying is, like, there's another layer of this. It's not just the exposure to the weather, it's also about the social system and how hot.

00;17;16;25 - 00;17;49;13

Eric Klinenberg

What can we learn about a social system in advance that would help us predict whether they're resilient and we can see it in, you know, a few different ways. I mean, first of all, it is important for us to understand the demography of different neighborhoods. So it just is the case that if you have a neighborhood that's got a lot of people who are impoverished or a lot of people who are over the age of 65 or 70, or a lot of people who live alone, a lot of people who are frail and have visits from, you know, home health providers, they have these kind of underlying features that make them susceptible.

00;17;49;13 - 00;18;10;13

Eric Klinenberg

There's the general social fragility. But then the question is, well, are there mitigating factors in the social environment? So if there's a neighborhood that's got a lot of older people, but,

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you know, they live in facilities that are really well taken care of, there's a robust, scene out, you know, outdoors or in the lobbies where people tend to socialize.

00;18;10;20 - 00;18;33;04

Eric Klinenberg

The people who run the buildings know who's alone and isolated and who's at risk. Those are all things that we could factor in to the equation. But if you if you know about a neighborhood where you have poverty and aging, frail population and there's really a lack of, you know, social engagement on a daily basis, then you have places where people are prone to isolation.

00;18;33;08 - 00;18;46;00

Eric Klinenberg

What we see in crisis after crisis is that it's the isolation on the social side that proves really deadly. It's this combination of extreme weather and people who are just cut off from support systems.

00;18;46;00 - 00;18;59;22

Burkina Morgan

When it comes to isolation, I think it's interesting. There are a lot of, public spaces that are private and because there is isolation in this public space, does resiliency show up in the same way?

00;18;59;25 - 00;19;16;19

Burkina Morgan

How does that run on the scale or resiliency when you have public spaces that are not only privately owned, but let's say a private pool in a building or, terrace, but it's only accessible to those in the building. Like where does that fall on the scale of social infrastructure and resilience?

00;19;16;19 - 00;19;28;13

Eric Klinenberg

I fear that one of the things that's happened in this country is that we stopped building great social infrastructure and the way that we used to, and instead this whole marketplace of gathering spaces has emerged.

00;19;28;13 - 00;20;06;02

Eric Klinenberg

And that means that if you're doing very well in New York City, and we know that a lot of people in New York City are doing very well. You know, there's amazing places to go and hang out with other amazing people. They're just very expensive, you know, or at least they cost something. And so what I think has happened is that people don't necessarily recognize just how hard it is to find good social infrastructure if you don't have that kind of access and wealth, and if you develop a really unequal system where well-off people use a

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certain set of private spaces and people who are struggling use another set of spaces, then those latter spaces get stigmatized.

00;20;06;05 - 00;20;06;14

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah.

00;20;06;15 - 00;20;23;25

Eric Klinenberg

Right there, the places for people who are in trouble, or they get oftentimes described as places that aren't safe or unstable. And we have a lot of people who don't have homes in New York City. And for them, like a great library is a very welcoming place, maybe the most welcoming places that make you feel a sense of dignity.

00;20;23;27 - 00;20;42;09

Eric Klinenberg

And it's wonderful. They do that. If we have a system that doesn't provide enough other kind of social infrastructure for people who are in trouble, and they wind up in the library all the time or in certain community centers all the time, then more affluent people are going to avoid them. And when they get stigmatized, they're not going to get funded.

00;20;42;14 - 00;21;11;20

Eric Klinenberg

And you create this vicious cycle. Typically, what happens in city budgeting is that, you know, we fund our priorities first, and if we have money left at the end of our really serious priorities, then we then we can give them to the library or to the park or to the playgrounds. These are luxury goods. And that's why every year, for those of you who follow, you know, city budgeting closely, there's always this brouhaha about like, are we going to cut funding to libraries are not confined to the libraries.

00;21;11;20 - 00;21;40;26

Eric Klinenberg

Literally every year it happens. And I think if we just call it parks and playgrounds, libraries, gardens, they fall into this second class and policy making circles, afterthoughts and the reason I call all of these things social infrastructure is to emphasize that you can't really have a healthy society, and you can't have a decent society, and you can't have a strong civic culture or democracy if you don't treat them as first order goods.

00;21;40;29 - 00;21;59;19

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah, absolutely. I also want to talk about another place that people go, which is the digital realm, and being not public in physical space, but public in the digital world is their social infrastructure in the digital realm?

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00;22;00;14 - 00;22;12;18

Eric Klinenberg

I don't think of social media and the internet as a social infrastructure. I think of it as a communications infrastructure because they help us communicate with each other and they really, you know, can do that.

00;22;12;20 - 00;22;38;20

Eric Klinenberg

But I kind of privilege the face to face as a different version of the social. And I know that that might sound a little outmoded. And, you know, clearly there's lots of good communications that makes us feel enriched and happier online. That unfortunately doesn't always do that. It can do the reverse quite easily. But the social interaction that I and most concerned about and that I privilege is face to face.

00;22;38;22 - 00;23;16;22

Eric Klinenberg

And again, the internet can help us do that. Like I wrote a book about online dating. The internet can help us find our romantic partners that can help us reconnect with family and old friends. It can help us forge groups and make plans for. We're going to have drinks on Friday night. It does all that stuff. But I think during the pandemic, we really learned about the difference between the internet as communications infrastructure and social infrastructure, because, you know, in that time, we all had plenty of communications with our friends and family and colleagues, but we didn't have a lot of face to face, you know, because we are hunkered down.

00;23;16;22 - 00;23;36;02

Eric Klinenberg

I think if you learned that there's a new pandemic that's about to hit the United States and that we would all spend the next year of our life in our apartments, you would be worried. And if I said, oh, don't, don't worry, you're going to have your computer and your phone. And so you can just, you know, FaceTime and text people.

00;23;36;04 - 00;23;53;20

Eric Klinenberg

You would not be content. You'd feel like that was very partial. You know, you'd say like, whoa, whoa, whoa. What about the face to face stuff and the getting together and being in bars and restaurants and, you know, high fiving people after, you know, goal on the soccer field or, you know, will you name your, yourself your favorite social activity?

00;23;53;20 - 00;24;20;05

Eric Klinenberg

You know, you're going to the gym, going to a dance club, you know, going to a great sociology lecture, you know, whatever it is that is your jam. I mean, you want to do it face to face. And so it's for that reason, I think that we need to be mindful that the internet can

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have a huge impact on our social life, and you could do a better job designing social media and a variety of platforms to help us get to the face to face.

00;24;20;10 - 00;24;22;03

Eric Klinenberg

But I don't think it's a substitute.

00;24;22;06 - 00;24;23;00

Emily Weidenhof

Yeah.

00;24;23;03 - 00;24;31;01

Burkina Morgan

So as we wind down, want to know what your biggest public transportation pet peeve is?

00;24;31;04 - 00;24;40;15

Eric Klinenberg

I still would like just a better way to get to LaGuardia. I just like a train that goes into LaGuardia. I think that would be a good thing. I mean, why can't we have that?

00;24;40;20 - 00;24;56;29

Eric Klinenberg

I live in lower Manhattan, and so I can take the train to Roosevelt, Jackson Heights. I can take the F train right there. And that's like pretty good. And then I got to transfer to a bus. I just would like to be able to stay underground in the subway and not have to worry about that, that transition. Is that fair?

00;24;57;01 - 00;24;57;17

Burkina Morgan

Very.

00;24;57;19 - 00;24;58;09

Emily Weidenhof

Very fair.

00;24;58;09 - 00;24;58;25

Eric Klinenberg

Yeah.

00;24;58;27 - 00;25;04;18

Emily Weidenhof

And Eric, what are you most enthusiastic about for the future of transportation?

00;25;04;21 - 00;25;23;07

Eric Klinenberg

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The pedestrianization of streets for cars is tremendously exciting, and I would like to see this city and many others create more spaces for people and give less space to cars. And I do think that that is coming.

00;25;23;09 - 00;25;25;25

Emily Weidenhof

We certainly agree. Streets are for people.

00;25;25;29 - 00;25;39;16

Emily Weidenhof

We share in your enthusiasm about the future, and we are so grateful for your time today. Keep up the amazing work amplifying the role of the public realm for all the good that it does our communities.

00;25;39;19 - 00;25;41;14

Burkina Morgan

This has been great. Thank you.

00;25;41;17 - 00;25;43;29

Eric Klinenberg

Well, thank you both. That was a lot of fun.

00;25;44;01 - 00;25;48;25

Ydanis Rodriguez

Hi. My name is Ydanis Rodriguez, Commissioner, of the New York City Department of Transportation.

00;25;48;28 - 00;26;17;09

Ydanis Rodriguez

Thank you for listening to Curb Enthusiasm by New York City DOT. This episode was produced by Michael Santos with video support from Sigurjon Gudjonsson and Juan Vega. Theme music by Michael Santos. Curb Enthusiasm is available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and other major streaming platforms. To learn more, visit [NYC.gov/CurbEnthusiasm](https://nyc.gov/CurbEnthusiasm).